DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 116 CG 020 159

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TITLE Family Reconstruction, a Way of Healing and Wholeness.
PUB DATE Jul 87
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (45th, Chicago, IL, October 29-November 1, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling Techniques; *Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Counseling; Family History; Family Relationship; Family Structure; Group Dynamics; Kinship; *Role Playing
IDENTIFIERS *Family Reconstruction

ABSTRACT

Family reconstruction is an imaginative process of family therapy whereby in a day's time a person gets connected to his or her family roots in a new and viable way leading to inner strength and wholeness. In family reconstruction, the person who does the reconstruction is called the Explorer. Within a group of people, the Explorer (who previously gathered data about his or her family of origin and also about the maternal and paternal families) uses members of the group to play not only roles of the family members but also of the Explorer. The role players are enrolled through sculpting (placing people in a statue position by the Explorer). Information comes to light as role players act out family scenes such as a marriage or a family meal in a psychodrama. The way is open for the Explorer to connect with her or his roots in a new way. The deeper understanding gained in this way leads to compassion and acceptance. Family reconstruction should be seen as a process people enter at different stages of their development and from which they will derive benefits commensurate with their level of growth. The benefits of reconstruction are reconnection with roots, understanding of patterns repeated across generations, understanding of defense mechanisms in the system, getting in touch with one's basic survival rule, self-awareness, and opportunity to make decisions for change. Family reconstruction can be used not just as a therapeutic process, but as a spiritual growth process as well. (ABL)

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FAMILY RECONSTRUCTION, A WAY OF HEALING AND WHOLENESS

William Nerin, in Collaboration with Anne Robertson, Ph.D.

"What do you mean, I am not seeing you," exclaimed Josh. "My eyes aren't blind yet! I see what I see and I see you sitting over there on that chair. And that's you. If not, who are you?!

"Oh, I am me, okay, I'm not anyone else," replied Bob. "But what I am trying to tell you is that there is more of me that you aren't seeing with your eyes."

Josh: "But, well, of course, I know that. I can't see your thoughts, your feelings, your soul."

"That's true; but I mean more than that," answered Bob. "Imagine my right foot being my mother's mother, and my right ankle my mother's father, and my right leg all of her brothers and sisters, and my upper thigh Mother herself. Imagine my left foot being my father's mother, my left ankle his father and the left leg being his brothers and sisters, with my upper left thigh being my father. Then imagine my torso being my brothers and sisters and my head being me. If you see all those people in my body, then you are seeing me. Also notice that my left calf is black and blue. Well, my father's brother died serving a prison term. I am all of my roots connected to my head, either healthy or bruised."

"Now I see what you're talking about," said Josh.

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Family reconstruction is an imaginative process whereby in a day's time a person gets connected to her or his family roots in a new and viable way, that leads to inner strength and wholeness. Virginia Satir created this process in the mid-sixties as a result of her many years of family therapy using the various therapeutic approaches available in psychotherapy.

For those of you who have never seen a family reconstruction, I will give a brief description of it. I call the person who does his or her reconstruction the Explorer. The process takes place within a group of people. The Explorer, prior to the actual reconstruction, has spent hours gathering data about the family of origin, and the maternal and paternal family. The outline of this data, as well as a complete explanation of the process of family reconstruction, can be found in my book, Family Reconstruction, Long Day's Journey into Light, W. W. Norton, 1986. The Explorer uses people from the group to play the roles of the family members as well as the role of the Explorer, herself or himself. To the degree that the Explorer is open and nondefensive, the choice of the role players will be uncannily accurate. So close to the real family members are these choices that it is a marvelous demonstration of how well the unconscious gathers and stores information, and how that information can be tapped into by a person. Often the Explorer will have had no previous experience with the members of the group.

After the role players are chosen they are enrolled through a variety of steps, the chief one being sculpting. By sculpting

I mean the Explorer places people in a statue position that expresses how the Explorer perceives the family system in their relationships, or how the explorer perceives a person as an individual. To facilitate this, I often tell the Explorer to imagine that he or she is an artist and this sculpture will be placed on exhibit so that people viewing the sculpture will say, "Ah, that's what that family is all about".

It is astounding how quickly people get into the skin of the family members they are representing. After the sculpt, the role members are invited by the guide of the reconstruction to reveal the thoughts and feelings that came to them while being in the sculpt position. The Explorer affirms more than not as true what he or she is hearing from the mouths of the role players. So accurate are the initial expressions that later on when new information begins to pour out, the Explorer is willing to accept it as possible if not indeed as valid.

This new information comes to light as the role players act out some family scenes in psychodrama. These scenes can be the classical scenes of engagement, marriage, birth and death, or the scenes can be simple ones as a typical evening meal, or preparing for Christmas, or dealing with a move or change of jobs in the family, or discussing having a baby. Any of these scenes can reveal the interplay of the basic dynamics of the individuals and the system, as well as the changes that occur in certain life events.

The new information brings about transformations; new perceptions, new feelings, new connections, new meanings take

shape in the Explorer. The more subtle and complicated psychological dimensions of mother, father, grandparent, uncles, aunts, sisters and brothers are experienced for the first time in the Explorer. These family members, formerly perceived basically in their roles as mother or father, are gradually perceived as humans just like the Explorer. As the Explorer experiences mother as Joyce and dad as Fred, i.e. as humans, then the way is open for the Explorer to connect with her or his roots in a new way--as equal human beings.

The fuller and deeper understanding of each member of the family leads to compassion and acceptance. The Explorer can drop the previous need to deny or distort family members. The root system can be accepted without having to make angels of certain people or keep some members as devils. The Explorer can then bring these roots back to self so as to feel complete.

Now often the Explorer is not ready for this kind of "re-union". More individuation is still required; some newfound anger needs to have its day in the psychic system; a new perception may require standing back from the family member. However, these new realizations help the Explorer get on with the unfinished business so that the road is paved for eventual reunion with one's roots.

Thus family reconstruction is to be seen as a process in which people enter at different stages of their development. They will derive benefits commensurate with whatever level of growth they are in. It is important that this be honored. As such, it is quite okay with me if, at the end of the day, an

Explorer can embrace one parent and yet feel estranged from another. Time and growth still need to transpire.

This is what I believe is the most central effect of family reconstruction. It is this reconnection in a new way with one's roots that gives wholeness and subsequent strength and confidence to the Explorer.

There are other benefits in family reconstruction. The Explorer can see patterns that are reproducing themselves from generation to generation; can see how defense mechanisms affect the person in the system; can get in touch with one's basic survival rule; can see themselves more clearly--also that decisions can be made for change. Besides new insight, new emotional experiences can be gained. The Explorer can express suppressed grief, anger, hurt, fear, powerlessness. These can be powerful releases and catharses.

These benefits are achieved not only by the Explorer but by members of the group. Being chosen to play a role befits that person's personality. So the opportunity arises for that person to deal with his or her issues in a one-step removed situation, i.e. in playing someone else. This distance allows a role player to see the issue with greater clarity. As the guide offers new ways for the psychodrama to unfold, e.g., "Now I want all of you to go after what you are wanting rather than suppressing your wants as actually happened in this family," - As they act out in the new way, a role player can see new ways for herself or himself. Often these insights or jolts occur days after the reconstruction itself.

Having described family reconstruction, I wish to share some of my experiences with it. My co-therapist and wife, Anne, and I have been guiding family reconstructions for over 12 years. Together we have probably led over 300 reconstructions. I must say that I have learned more about family systems in doing these reconstructions than I have from any other single source. Over the years Anne and I have also learned how to shorten the experience through a wider and more varied use of sculpting that has in fact made the experience more powerful for the participants and the explorer doing her or his reconstruction. We have become less rigid than we were back in the seventies when we followed a rather cookbook approach of always establishing four or five classic family psychodramatic scenes such as engagements, marriage, birth, death, filled with many facts of the family history. While not underestimating these scenes, today we are far more willing to do them with more or less detail, sculptured simply or psychodramatized, in pantomine or in fantasy, depending on the moment unfolding within the total gestalt.

In the beginning I would use family reconstruction mainly for those people stuck in their other therapeutic processes or who had obvious deep-rooted family origin issues. Today I see, and am putting together ways of using family reconstruction as a spiritual growth process. I hope more and more to expand its use imaginatively in retreat and spiritual movements, creating exercises that can be used around family reconstruction as a centerpiece.

(The word spiritual means to me that part of me that is in touch with something or someone larger or higher than I. When I experience that which I call spiritual, I am experiencing myself as part of something far greater than I -- a universal life and love force. It brings me a deep sense of peace and trust, that no matter what, all is well. Since family is the entity that deals centrally with life and death and all of the mystery involved in that, being fully rooted in one's family is a natural springboard into the spiritual realm of life.)

It has been my experience in leading family reconstruction groups that have an ongoing life for about a year, that has brought me to see the application of family reconstruction as a spiritual process. Family reconstruction groups allow for the deepening of the family experience centered in life and death and mystery. So I see family reconstruction as both a healing as well as a spiritual process leading to wholeness.